



## **Aspen Ideas Festival**

June 28, 2014

Good morning.

My friends, hard truths fall painfully on ears that don't want to hear. Something is not right in our nation. Every day, some young African American men are being killed and are killing each other in alarming numbers.

We are supposed to be one nation, indivisible, with one shared destiny. But the truth is - we have forsaken our African-American boys. Now, like a vine choking the life from a proud oak, the creeping menace of violence tightens its grip on our nation.

America is caught in a cycle of violence and we drown in sorrow as we mourn these deaths, therefrom.

It is a constant drumbeat of death - a constant drumbeat of shootings and murder - day after day after day after day after day. Every year, nearly 15,000 people murdered on American soil - about 40 people lost every 24 hours.

A Newtown slaughter (28 dead)... plus twelve... every day; a Virginia Tech massacre every 20 hours; a Washington Navy Yard mass shooting every 8 hours; and by the time this forum is over more lives will have likely been lost than the Tsarnaev brothers took that horrible day in Boston.

Indeed, last month every news outlet in America covered Elliot Rodger's murderous rampage at Isla Vista near the UC-Santa Barbara campus - 6 people dead. But no one said a word about the other 80 victims, taken by gun violence across the nation in the days prior.

The humanitarian crisis is not just in some far off nation, but here on our streets, in our neighborhoods and in our homes. America cannot be strong abroad if we are weak at home.

Morally, economically, and for the good of this nation's strength and security, we must do more.

Slow snowflakes of death fall across the nation every day, melting away from our consciousness before we even know they are there.

We rarely take note, and on the rare occasions that we do, we either forget immediately, stay in denial or just walk on by.

But today, let us pause for a moment and take note of some most recent deaths.

Early Thursday morning, Brendan Tevlin shot dead in his Jeep outside an apartment complex in West Orange, New Jersey. He had just texted his mom saying he was heading home. A freshman in college, Brendan was 19.

Nearly 800 miles away at almost the same moment, 21 year old John Huddleston and 18 year old Syndey Smith were shot in North Knoxville, Tennessee. John is dead and Sydney will survive.

The day before, Delmonta Young shot and killed in Baltimore, he was 19.

Just a few hours earlier, 29-year old Kevin Richardson and 26-year old Nakeri Jackson shot dead in Miami. That same day, in rural Indiana outside of Louisville, Nicky Fields was murdered.

On Monday night, Andre Roberts, age 23, shot dead in Pittsburgh and 15-year old Nathan Torres was murdered in Windsor, California.

Then there is Endia Martin, killed after what started with cross words on Facebook spilled over into the streets. She was shot and killed in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood, she was 14 years old.

And just a few weeks ago in New Orleans, Johan Kenner was at the neighborhood park when two shooters opened fire. He tried to run, but a nagging football injury slowed him down. Johan was hit twice and died, he was 17 years old.

We are losing a whole generation of promise and these fresh victims lay cold in a mass grave shared by hundreds of thousands Americans.

Consider this, from 1980-2012, 626,000 people, a disproportionate number African American men, were murdered in our nation.

That's more Americans lost to murder in the last few decades than were killed during World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf War, the War in Iraq, and War in Afghanistan - combined.

So it has been decades of mass murder in slow motion on the streets of America.

This is not who we are as a nation.

This must stop.

There are solutions, but at this point, instead of strong decisive action, the overall national response to the daily carnage has been tepid, and eerily quiet.

It is as though we have become numb to the constant violence, and only the most horrifying mass shootings slap us awake from this daze... but we still do nothing. The problem is so complex and painful we get overwhelmed and look away. We are weak.

Maybe we're scared that if we speak up, we'll end up in the crosshairs. Or perhaps we as a nation have bought into an evil notion - that the lives of these mostly young African American

men killed every day across our nation do not have value and do not deserve our urgent attention.

We've all heard it before - "just thugs killing thugs" and, "there's nothing you can do about it."

But this is a lie.

Every life is precious and these young men were not predestined to this fate. We will never know what might have been.

Instead of grappling with this problem, we desperately look for quick fixes and want to 'get tough' – more prisons, more guards, more guns. But we just make things worse. We can't just arrest or imprison our way out of this problem. We've tried that and it doesn't work.

America has more people incarcerated than over a dozen other countries... **combined**.

And many nations with fewer people in prison have less crime, less murder.

Since the early 1980s, the number of incarcerated people in the United States has increased over four fold, going from less than 500,000 to about 2.2 million people today. That increase is over double the rate of inflation over the same period.

In Louisiana alone, since 1990, the population in prison has gone from about 19,000 to about 40,000 today - an increase of over 100%. That leaves about 1 in 86 adults in our state incarcerated and nearly half are serving sentences for nonviolent, mostly drug related offenses.

Nationally, around \$70 billion spent every year on corrections. That's about the same as the budget for the entire US Department of Education. Indeed, on average public schools spend about \$12,000-\$13,000 per pupil per year. To incarcerate one person for 1 year... it costs about \$30,000 depending on the state.

In Louisiana alone, in two decades the state went from spending about \$275 million on incarceration to \$750 million today. And after all that, Louisiana's violent crime rate is higher now than it was in 1977.

In my city of New Orleans, we spend over \$31 million per year on the jail, about the same as the city spends from the General Fund on the Department of Public Works, the Criminal District Court, the District Attorney, and the recreation department, combined.

Now a bipartisan coalition is coming together around this issue of mass incarceration. From Senator Rand Paul and Newt Gingrich to Attorney General Eric Holder and Senator Dick Durbin - across the political spectrum there is growing consensus that we can't arrest and imprison our way out of this problem. We need to be tough AND smart on crime.

But here is the truth – we have a long way to go. America is drunk on violence and although today it may be another family in mourning, like a virus, the violence spreads.

So we may not all be at fault, but we all have a responsibility to take on this fight. Local, state, and federal government, each need to do their part; churches and schools, friends and neighbors, mothers and fathers, each need to do their part.

And of course, these young men doing the shooting must do their part as well – they must stop shooting.

For our part in New Orleans, we have had enough of the shooting. We've had enough of the death and destruction on our city's streets.

Since taking office four years ago, finding a way to fight murder has been my number one priority.

So we went to police officers on the beat and mothers of murder victims. We went to expert criminologists and held focus groups with young men in the game - all to ask - how can we solve this problem?

And you know something, from the hardened detective to the 17-year old kid from the neighborhood, they all told us essentially the same thing - solutions have to hit the streets with a special focus on prevention.

From this wisdom, we designed our cutting edge comprehensive murder reduction strategy - NOLA FOR LIFE.

It is smart and holistic. After all, a lot must change to prevent murder.

We need more jobs, good schools, healthy neighborhoods, stronger families, and a better police department.

But we learned that what matters most when it comes to preventing murder is a small group of mostly young African American men who hang out together and are the ones shooting and getting shot.

Indeed, when it comes to murder in New Orleans, the same profile emerges time and again.

About 1 of every 3 murders occurs in the same four neighborhoods. About 80% of the victims are young African American men. Many are high school drop outs and are unemployed. 80% had an arrest record, over half are under 29 years old, and around 80% of the victims and their murderers knew each other.

And after talking to these young men who fit the profile we learned something else – they want to get out of the game.

Theirs is often a life of poverty, fear and desperation. To hear it from them, it is kill or be killed. They want help.

We need to be tough, but also smart. To prevent murder, we must find a way to help these young men see the path towards a better future.

To achieve that end, we go to those young men doing violence. We literally sit them down and say – we value you, we love you: put down the gun and we can help you... but if you don't listen... we will take necessary actions to protect the city.

Sometimes the opportunity to make a change, a glimmer of hope, is all that is needed to get someone on the right track.

I think about one young man who knew he was on the wrong path. He dealt drugs; he carried a gun, and ran with a crew. In fact, when he first got involved with NOLA FOR LIFE, he came with two of his partners. Before the end of the year - one would be arrested for murder and the other was shot dead.

But on that day, he chose a new way. With our help, he got a job - worked hard and has been promoted. He got off the streets and into a local community college. He is building a new life for himself and his young children.

However, some do not heed the warning and keep doing violence. So, our new local, state and federal Multi-Agency Gang Unit has to bring them in.

Thus far eight violent groups targeted, 84 individuals indicted and with the help of our outstanding US Attorney Kenneth Polite, in some cases we are going federal with these guys using RICO statutes.

So we are sending a message through both word and deed. To those terrorizing our neighborhoods- you have a choice - stop the shooting, put down your gun, we will help you get on the right path, or else we are coming for you.

We don't have all the answers, but we're trying anything we can to support our young men as they turn away from the violence.

With Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter along with several national philanthropic foundations we started Cities United, which brings together Mayors from across the country to address the issue of violence amongst African American men.

Our Ceasefire New Orleans program seeks to stop the cycle of violence by mediating conflicts, and hundreds from New Orleans toughest neighborhoods have come out for Midnight Basketball to play, hear from role models, and get connected to jobs, training or whatever else is needed.

Plus, we are working hard to help ex-offenders get their life back on track. This piece is really important because even though there are 2.2 million people in jail today, most aren't going to be there forever.

Currently, about 1/3 of all the people being released from prison today go back to jail within three years. So we have a choice to make – we can either wait until they commit another crime or we can get ahead of the problem and try to help.

We've got to shut down this revolving door. It is outrageous - one in fourteen black men is behind bars and one in seven is either in prison, on parole, or on probation.

To fight violent crime and murder we can't just keep on ignoring this problem. So in New Orleans, as a part of NOLA FOR LIFE, we have launched an aggressive Reentry Strategy. We want to reach out within 72 hours of release from prison and have a new Workforce Reentry Program connecting ex-offender to services and jobs.

Plus, at the city we have "banned the box" where job applicants must list their criminal records. The goal – help the formerly incarcerated at least get a foot in the door so they can explain their past and come back from the mistakes they've made.

After all, in New Orleans, we know a thing or two about coming back.

Nine years ago, Hurricane Katrina crashed ashore and flooded 80% of our city, caused billions of dollars in damage and left over 1,800 dead.

Since then, while holding true to our unique culture, we sought to change our city and become a better version of ourselves.

Necessity is the mother of invention and we are not rebuilding back to what we used to be, but instead are creating the city we always wanted to become.

We are tackling tough problems like murder, but at the same time are remaking every part of our city from schools and the healthcare system, to the police department and City Hall. Indeed, we are America's most immediate laboratory for social change and innovation.

And we are seeing great results.

Now we are one of the fastest growing cities in America: thousands of new jobs, our schools are improving rapidly, revenues are up, blight is down, and murder is at a historic nearly 30-year low.

This is good, lives have been saved, but we are still searching, trying to learn the truth about what is happen on our city streets and how to stop it. Indeed, we have a long, long way to go.

In New Orleans, we still have more murder than nearly anywhere else, 156 people, our fellow citizens, were killed in New Orleans this past year and another 67 have already been lost in 2014.

But, we are not alone – last year, 156 murders in New Orleans... 415 murders in Chicago, 333 in New York City, 255 in LA, 247 in Philadelphia, 137 in Dallas, 234 in Baltimore, 333 in Detroit.

But murder doesn't just happen. No, this scourge grows out of poverty and hopelessness.

For many, the deck is stacked against them from day one – broken families, struggling neighborhoods, poor schools, inadequate health care, no jobs.

The pressure of this dysfunction takes a toll.

Frustration turns to cynicism, misery turns to despair.

Hope fades, hate grows, happy eyes turn sad, smiles turn sour, bitterness sprouts, and in the end tragedy triumphs - blood on the street.

In a downward spiral, violence begets violence. The shooter of today so often becomes the victim of tomorrow.

And every murder leaves a wide wake of destruction – a long line of victims – the collateral damage of gunshots in the dark.

An innocent child loses a father; a mother's heart is broken, a family is left alone.

That's what happened to Leonard Galmon.

Leonard's father was killed on the streets of New Orleans when he was just 4; his 17-year old mother left alone.

Five years later young Leonard's life was again turned upside down, this time by another tragedy – Hurricane Katrina.

There were no silver linings in Katrina – but with the wind, rain, fire and flood waters also came change. By the time Leonard was a senior in high school the post-storm education reforms had taken root.

He went from one of the worse schools in the city to a charter school, which had a special focus on college. That made all the difference.

With the help of his teachers, Leonard got all his ducks in a row and eventually applied to over 10 colleges and universities. This fall he is set to attend Yale University on a full ride.

For weeks Leonard's story was everywhere –a big story on the front page of the paper and more articles and editorials followed. He was honored by the City Council and by the State Legislature. Congratulations and donations flooded in from across the city - all because he showed that there is another way. With help, even just a little bit of help, our young African American men can do great things.

But for Leonard it was not easy and we should not ask any child born in America to bear such a burden just to get a chance for something more. Even the greatest amongst us could not climb the mountain that Leonard has scaled.

If you want to know just how steep the path is for many of our young people, just go into any elementary school in any tough neighborhood in America. Ask a classroom of 8-year olds some questions:

Who has lost a friend or a family member to violence...

Who has had to run for cover from gunfire...

Who has seen blood on the streets?

The answers our little children will give to these questions will bring you to your knees.

Leonard is the exception, not the rule and there are two sides to every coin. The other side of this coin is Marshall Coulter.

In many ways, Marshall is a lot like Leonard. Both young African American men from tough neighborhoods; both lost their fathers when they were young; both their childhoods were marked by Katrina.

Like air, Leonard rose above it all... but Marshall fell like a rock.

His first arrest came for disturbing the peace at just 10 years old. More run-ins with the law followed - marijuana, theft and burglary. Marshall would later be described by his brother as a 'professional thief.'

Then last July, at age 14, Marshall got shot in the head as he stood in a stranger's backyard at two in the morning.

He had climbed over a tall fence to snoop around, opening a window storm shutter to peer into the dark house. There were three people asleep inside – Merritt Landry, his pregnant wife and 2-year old daughter.

It was Merritt who, awoken by his barking dog, grabbed a gun and stepped out the back door into his yard. What exactly happened next we'll never know for sure, but in the early morning darkness a warning was yelled out, Marshall made a sudden movement and Merritt squeezed the trigger.

After the shooting, Marshall was on death's door, in a coma for weeks, but he survived.

Meanwhile, the homeowner Merritt Landry was arrested for attempted murder, but after months, the DA declined to press charges.

One reason the DA decided not to move forward was that, unbelievably, within months of leaving the hospital Marshall was again arrested - for another burglary.

Think about that. Even after all that had happened to him, at the tender age of 15, Marshall was stuck on a dark path and we all know where it ends – jail or an untimely death, another life wasted.

So, we have two young men – one likely going to jail, the other going to Yale. They started in the same place – so where did their paths diverge?

When did hope turn to despair? How can we help young men like Marshall before it is too late?



As one local columnist wrote – how can we make Leonard the general rule and not just the exception?

Not enough investment and attention is focused on our vulnerable young African American males – they think we have forsaken them and maybe they are right.

Even Leonard is not out of the woods yet - only one out of every ten low-income, first generation college students who start college actually graduate. Indeed, all the attention and exposure Leonard received is telling. It is good to celebrate his success, but it shows how far we have to go.

I hope and pray that someday it will **not** be front-page news when a young African American man from New Orleans is accepted into Yale.

There are no easy answers to our problems, but one thing is for sure: to fight murder and help our young African American men we need everyone on board.

Local, state, and federal government, each need to do their part.

Churches and schools, friends and neighbors, mothers and fathers, each need to do their part.

Overall, we need a surge on the streets, schools, churches, and playgrounds of America.

Democrats, Republicans, Congress and President Obama should lock hands and dedicate themselves to supporting our young African American men.

President Obama's My Brother's Keeper Initiative seeks to do just that – close the opportunity gaps for our young African American men so they can thrive.

We should also launch a stronger, more targeted COPs community-policing program, just like Congress and President Clinton did in the 1990s. More money to put more cops on the beat would go a long way to making our neighborhoods safe.

Congress has the money.

In fact, according to the Government Accountability Office, from 2009-2011 nearly \$14 billion was spent by the US government building, hiring, training and equipping police departments.

But this \$14 billion wasn't spent in New Orleans or Philadelphia or Chicago, even though we are fighting the good fight against murder on what amounts to a shoestring budget.

No, this money went to build police departments and security forces abroad, for the people of Afghanistan and Iraq, Pakistan, Mexico, and Colombia.

Again, to be strong abroad we must be strong at home as well.

We need to direct federal resources back to the home front.

We need Congress to treat fighting murder and violent crime as a national priority.

Furthermore, we need to do something about criminals with illegal guns.

Let me be clear- I support the Second Amendment.

And the genius of our constitution is that it creates a strong balance in every sentence between rights and responsibilities; it distinguishes between the right to speak our mind and the crime of yelling fire in a crowded movie theatre.

Common sense solutions can be found that strike this balance and stay true to original intent.

There is common ground on this issue.

I'll give you just one example; everyone can agree that we should do what we can to get illegal guns out of the hands of dangerous criminals.

And here is one specific way we can do it.

Over 30 years ago Congress authorized federal agencies and prosecutors to target drug dealers as a part of the 'war on drugs.'

We should do the same thing with violent gun offenders and make their prosecution a federal priority.

Let's give prosecutors clear concurrent jurisdiction over all violent offenses committed by firearms that travelled in interstate commerce.

Let's bring the hammer down on these violent criminals with the full weight of the federal judicial system, just like we have tried to do in New Orleans.

The bottom line is that on these big issues of the day we refuse to look away.

We should not be quiet.

We cannot stay in denial.

Americans tackle problems.

We fix things; we put our hands to the plow and find a way to make life better.

Think about this - when nearly 300 little girls get kidnapped by murderous terrorists a world away in a Nigerian village we respond.

When Putin threatens the peace, we act – President Obama wants a \$1 billion security aid package for Poland and other Eastern European nations. Not to mention the \$500 million just requested by the President to train Syrian rebels.

This is what we do - the United States of America doesn't shy away from a challenge. We step up and work to solve big problems even if there are no clear solutions.

And on this issue of preventing murder, it is our people getting slaughtered and if we are truly one nation, indivisible, something needs to be done.

We have solutions – example after example of how we can get it done. All we need is the will and the focus.

This is a national issue that deserves a national response.

Like Mayor Nutter from Philadelphia says, if every year the KKK killed thousands of African American kids, the entire country would be in lock down.

If thousands of well-off white kids from the suburbs were murdered every year there would be hell to pay.

If either-one of these things happened, the earth would stop spinning, the sun would stop shining, and we would respond, marshalling every resource to find a way, or make a way to fix the problem.

Yet nearly 15,000 people, a disproportionate number young African American men are murdered... not one word.

Here is the point –as Americans if something is a priority, we either find a solution or make one.

Some may say 'not my neighborhood, not my kids, not my problem.' But violence is like a virus; it spreads.

It spreads from the streets of Central City New Orleans or the Southside of Chicago to a movie theatre in Aurora, Colorado to Newtown, Connecticut to the Navy Yard in Washington DC, and then perhaps it is on your doorstep.

I say this not to make you afraid, but to make you realize that everything is interconnected – what affects one impacts all. We need to make sure that no-one is left behind.

But if you really understand the problem of murder, you can see that no law, or rule or regulation or federal funding alone is going to fundamentally change the culture of death on the streets of America.

Government on its best day cannot replace a family. It won't matter without personal responsibility. We each need to take care of our own business and help take care of the people around us.

There is no excuse. Quit waiting, start doing.

We may not all be at fault, but we are all responsible.

Some are cynical and believe that we cannot change.

Some believe that the murder of thousands of young, African American men on our streets is to be accepted, like it is part of the natural order of things.

But I am here to say that we are each bound together as one nation, indivisible, with one shared destiny.

Now is the time to take on these tough challenges.

Now is the time to make combating murder and violent crime a top national priority.  
Now is the time to help our young African American men succeed and overcome the challenges they face.

The people in this room are some of the leading voices of our proud nation – you can make a difference.

So, take this urgent message to heart and keep it at the front of your minds.

Join me in stating clearly as a moral imperative.

This is not right.

This is not who we are as Americans.

The killing must stop.

Invest in the solutions to this problem – get involved, spend your time, treasure and talent on this most difficult issue.

Through this work, we can inspire our nation and the world and prove that out of tragedy can come triumph. After all, this is what we do as Americans. We tackle big challenges, and this one is as tough as we have seen in awhile.

We have a long way to go, together.